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AUTHOR	Adelman, Clifford
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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses degree attainment statistics and their analyses, particularly when applying time censors to the equation. The author describes at the High School and Beyond Sophomore Cohort Longitudinal Study, which followed a high school graduating class of 1982, from the time of its graduation until 1993, when most of the cohort was 29 or 30 years old. The paper suggests that, when analyzing degree attainment statistics, a long-term censor, something beyond 5 or 6 years, should be utilized. He also argues that degree attainment rates can only be determined using a cohort of students who have actually enrolled at some point in a bachelor's degree-granting institution. Graduation rates are determined by student persistence, and may involve more than one institution; thus, system graduation rates are more significant than institutional graduation rates. The author goes on to argue that students use community colleges for many reasons, not all of which are connected to the need to acquire credentials. For instance, students may acquire a number of credits in courses related to computer technologies in order to enhance their job marketability. The author concludes that any evaluation should focus on the student before the institution. (NB)

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MORE THAN 13 WAYS OF LOOKING AT DEGREE ATTAINMENT

By Dr. Clifford Adelman

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330 West State Street, Trenton, NJ 08618 • (609) 392-3434 • Fax: (609) 392-8158
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Degree Attainment

MORE THAN 13 WAYS OF LOOKING AT DEGREE ATTAINMENT*

DR. CLIFFORD ADELMAN
Senior Research Analyst
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
United States Department of Education
Washington, D.C.

The analysis and opinions offered in this article are his own, are intended to stimulate discussion, and do not necessarily reflect departmental positions or policy.

This is the third in a series of Occasional Papers that the Council of County Colleges plans to publish on topics important to community colleges throughout the state and nationally.

The Council was fortunate to have Dr. Clifford Adelman as the keynote speaker at its Capitol Hill breakfast during the 2000 ACCT Legislative Seminar. He is one of the most respected researchers on the national higher education scene today. His most recent work on baccalaureate degree completion – *Answers in the Toolbox* – is getting widespread attention in state capitals across the country.

Dr. Adelman's research is based on a national data base that tracks students from the time they were in the 10th grade until roughly age 30. His conclusions are straightforward and of major significance for community colleges throughout the country. Most importantly, Dr. Adelman's research shows that community college students who transfer to four-year colleges are more likely to earn bachelor's degrees than those who started in four-year colleges. A related finding of Dr. Adelman's work, however, is that early transfers – namely, those students who transfer after earning 10 or fewer credits at the community college – complete bachelor's degrees at a much lower rate.

This Occasional Paper – "More Than 13 Ways of Looking at Degree Attainment" – addresses a slightly different question, but an important one just the same: What proportion of college students earn degrees? This is an important policy question for all states, but especially for those like New Jersey that have recently implemented "performance funding" as part of their approach to funding public higher education.

One of the stated goals of New Jersey's performance funding system is "improved graduation rates." While graduation is certainly one of the important outcomes of a community college education, Dr. Adelman cautions that we should focus more on the completion rates of students rather than the graduation rates of colleges. He concludes from his own research that the completion rate for community college students, "is an astounding 89 percent."

Additional copies of this report are available upon request from the Council office.

Dr. Lawrence A. Nespoli, President
New Jersey Council of County Colleges, September 2000

The title of this piece, a play on that of Wallace Stevens' poem, "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," reflects the nearly infinite variety of nuances in the basic question about attainment in American higher education.

When newspaper reporters or state legislative aides telephone and ask, "What proportion of college students earn a bachelor's degree?" or "What percentage of community college students earn credentials?" the answers are not clear until the questioner defines who is in the denominator (or what we call the "universe"): all students who graduated from high school? all students who ever said they aspired to a bachelor's degree? all students who entered college? all students who attended a four-year college at any time? all students who entered a four-year college directly from high school?

After the denominator, the numerator is comparatively easy, but still must be specified. For the bachelor's degree, the numerator must include a time "censor": within five years of high school graduation? within five years of entering college? within six years? by age 35? ever?

Of course, we can complicate the numerator with conditions other than those of time, but with each additional degree of complexity, we no longer are asking the basic question.

In July of this year, I was asked the basic question by staff at the Congressional Budget Office. The context for the question was a proposed amendment to the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, and required a long-term censor – something beyond five or six years.

The purpose of this presentation is not to discuss the proposed amendment, but rather to share with you what I told my colleagues at the Congressional Budget Office.

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* The original version of this article appeared in *National Cross-Talk*, Vol. 6, No. 4 (Fall, 1998), pp. 11-12.

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The source for the data is the postsecondary transcript file of the High School & Beyond Sophomore Cohort longitudinal study. This is the second national longitudinal study conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics. The postsecondary transcripts in those studies enable us to tell very accurate student histories, histories that cross state lines and involve many institutions – for the same student.

At present, this is the only data source in the nation that can answer the basic question about long term degree completion rates in recent years. In these data, we are looking at the history of the scheduled high school graduating class of 1982, from the time of their graduation up to 1993, when most of the cohort was 29 or 30 years old.

The Four-Year College Story

The basic position I take in Table 1, "Postsecondary Fate to Age 30" (located on page four), is that one is not in the denominator for the calculation of bachelor's degree attainment rates unless one has gone to the trouble of actually enrolling in a bachelor's degree-granting institution. With that simple gesture, one says far more than repeating 100 times "I want to get a bachelor's degree" or "I am working toward a bachelor's degree." It is neither accurate nor fair to judge attainment among those who did not make a minimum attempt by age 30.

If one enters a four-year college directly from high school, and gets by the 60th credit, the odds are about 7 in 8 of completing a bachelor's degree by age 30. That's pretty good! In an age of multi-institutional attendance, such system graduation rates make far more sense than "institutional graduation rates." Institutions may "retain," but it is students who persist. And the last time I looked, federal higher education policy was directed at students, not institutions.

Since all these data came from the college transcript records, I could add the following note: At age 30, and among those who had earned more than 60 credits, a relatively low proportion (9 to 12 percent) of the low proportion (13 to 21 percent) who had not earned a bachelor's degree were still in school.

In other words, the vast majority of non-completers had drifted away from higher education at age 30. While we always are confident that some will return, it is eminently apparent that we are children of time, and that other demands and possibilities of life come to supersede those of formal education after we have passed through our 20s.

The Community College Story

The community college story presented in Table 2 (located on page four) is both very different and very exciting. For years, we have been beating up on community colleges because of what we perceive to be low degree completion rates.

But students use community colleges for a variety of reasons, not all of which are connected to credentials. Of the entire universe of students who ever enter community colleges, nearly one out of six never earns even a semester's worth of credits. These "incidental" students are excluded from the analysis in "Community College Fate to Age 30" because they are just that – incidental – and it is not fair, or accurate, to include them in a universe with which we judge institutional performance.

...students use community colleges for a variety of reasons, not all of which are connected to credentials.

Table 2 thus sets a minimum threshold of credits earned by students at community colleges as undergraduates. (It excludes a small number of students who attended community colleges after earning a bachelor's degree as well as those four-year college students who took a course or two at community colleges.)

Table 2 does something else that is very important to judging community college performance in terms of labor market preparation. It takes students who did not complete any credential, looks at their transcript records, and asks whether one can describe a dominant "tone" of study, something analogous to a college major

or a balanced general education program.

For example, a student may have accumulated 36 credits (and no credential), of which half are in finite mathematics, electronics, computer programming, computer organization and architecture. There is no doubt of a dominant "tone" to this record. One can say that this student is prepared to enter the labor market in the general area of computer technologies.

This does not mean the student is an automatic JAVA-whiz, nor does it mean that we have witnessed the end of the individual's education and training. What it does mean is the student has derived something from the community college experience that anyone – including employers – can describe. And I don't need to remind readers that a majority of community college students attend in order to establish specific trajectories into the labor market.

At age 30, then, those who have attended community colleges in non-incidental ways have "separated" from the system in a satisfactory manner if they have accomplished one of four ends: 1) transferred to a four-year college and received a bachelor's degree; 2) earned a terminal associate's degree; 3) earned a certificate indicating a coherent course of study that is nonetheless not a full degree program; or 4) taken a sufficient amount of coursework that can be described as a partial major or complete lower-division general education program.

Table 2 shows what I call "community college dominant students" – students who earned 30 or more credits from a community college and fewer than 11 credits from four-year colleges. In this group, the *de facto* "completion rate" (associate's degree + certificate + a classifiable cluster of coursework) is an astounding 89 percent – equivalent to the bachelor's degree completion rate of four-year college students who entered directly from high school and earned more than 60 credits.

For skeptics who say that this "community college dominant" group is small, I beg to differ. We are looking at about 325,000 people from a single high school graduating class.

For the record (and because someone is bound to ask), at the "community college dominant" level, the distribution of classifiable course clusters of those who left without a credential was: complete general education program (23 percent); business and marketing (15 percent); business support occupations (10 percent); arts and applied arts (8 percent); computer science and technology (7 percent); other science and tech (7 percent); trades and crafts (7 percent); and other fields (23 percent). Not all of these are statistically significant percentages, but they give one a decent idea of the distribution.

...the de facto "completion rate for community college students" (associate's degree + certificate + a classifiable cluster of coursework) is an astounding 89 percent...

So What's the Point?

Our system may appear sloppy to some, but our results are better than the popular myths, most of which use the institution, and not the student, as the unit of analysis. We have to be prepared to provide solid answers to those who hold us accountable in terms that the public understands. Our judges have many ways of asking the question, and any appearance of uncertainty on our part in answering will be taken as a sign of vulnerability.

Our focus must be on the student. We have to be clear about the terms of our answers: The terms must be those of common sense, and we must be able to combine them quickly and authoritatively.

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Table 1
Postsecondary Fate to Age 30

1993 Achievement of Students from the High School Class of 1982 Who Attended 4-Year Colleges

NOTE: All rows Add to 100%

	60+ Creds No Degree	Certificate	Assoc.	Bachelor's
Attended 4-YrCollege & Earned >60 Creds	12	2	7	79
1st Inst was 4-Yr & No Delay After High School	12	1	4	82
>60 Creds from 4-Yr & No Delay After High School	10	1	2	87

SOURCE: National Center for Education Statistics: High School & Beyond Sophomore Cohort (Restricted) Postsecondary Education Transcript File (NCES 98-135)

Table 2
Community College Fate to Age 30

1993 Achievement of College-Goers from the High School Class of 1982 Who Attended Community Colleges

NOTE: All rows Add to 100%

	>29 Creds No Degree No Field	>29 Creds No Degree But Field	Certificate	Assoc.
Earned >29 Creds From Comm Col And <11 Credits From 4-Yr Colleges	11	36	15	38
& No Delay After High School	11	36	12	41

SOURCE: National Center for Education Statistics: High School & Beyond Sophomore Cohort (Restricted) Postsecondary Education Transcript File (NCES 98-135)

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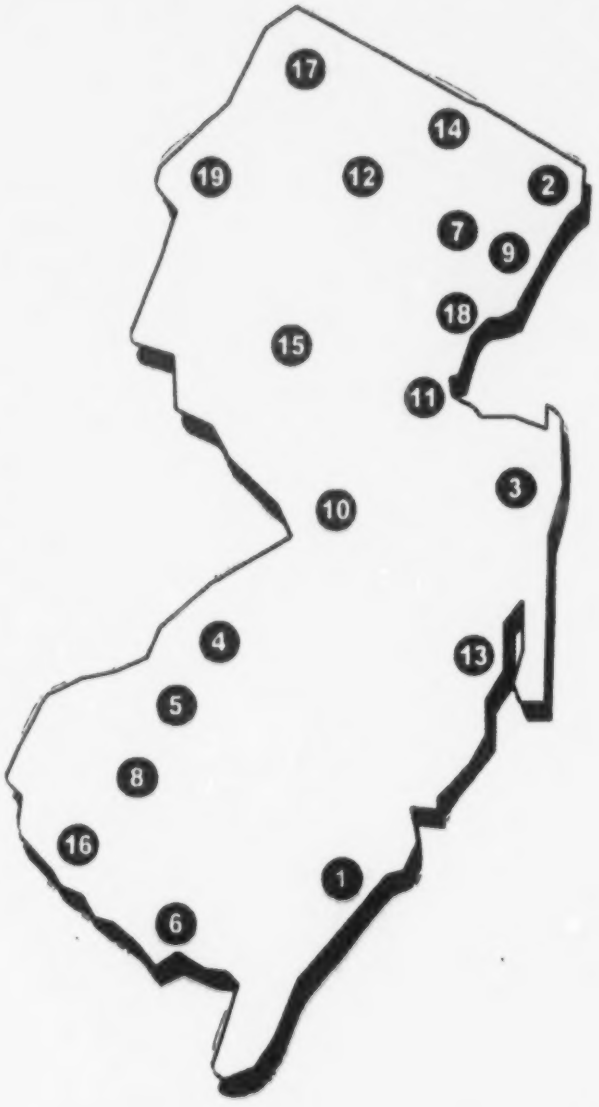

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